

September 30, 2020

Mr. Russell T. Vought, Director of the Office of Management and Budget
Dr. Kelvin K. Droegemeier, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. Vought and Dr. Droegemeier:

We the undersigned strongly oppose the September 22, 2020 Executive Order (EO) on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping. We believe it to be destructive, misguided, misleading, and brazen in its usage of civil rights imagery and language to justify its position. First and foremost, it is crucial to understand that although the EO is framed in terms of workplace training, its potential impact is much, much broader. The key sentence in Section 1 “Purpose” is “Therefore, it shall be the policy of the United States not to promote race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating in the Federal workforce or in the Uniformed Services, and not to allow grant funds to be used for these purposes. In addition, Federal contractors will not be permitted to inculcate such views in their employees.” The applicability of the EO is (a) all instruction and training in the uniformed services, (b) workplace training by government contractors of their own employees as well as the training offered by the contractors’ sub-awardees and vendors of their own employees, (c) federal grant programs (by extension activities within federal grants), and (d) federal agencies (also covered by a separate executive order).

Although there are distractors within the definitions of key terms in the EO, it appears to use its definitions to forbid any discussion, outside of academic instruction, of (a) systemic or structural racism or sexism, (b) acknowledgement of collective benefit from past discriminatory practices, or (c) implicit bias. The EO sets up the false narrative that such discussions can only occur in service of believing the United States of America is irredeemably racist and sexist. This is not true. We are firm in the belief that we have a collective responsibility to continue our country’s progress from the worst characteristics of its past to fulfill its promise as a land of equal rights and opportunities.

It remains a fact that at the time of this country’s founding, the franchise was restricted to the 6% of the population that was White, male, and owned property. It is a fact that African Americans were enslaved, that Native Americans were forcibly displaced to resource-poor locations, that Mexican Americans were made foreigners in lands their families had owned for generations, and that the Chinese Exclusion Act and Geary Act prevented many Asians from legally immigrating until the Acts’ repeal in 1943. It is a fact that women were not permitted to vote in federal elections until 1920. It remains a fact that, following World War II, “redlining” prevented members of poor or minority communities from purchasing homes and building family wealth. It remains a fact that male and female members of majority and minority communities hold implicit, unconscious biases against women and members of minority communities based on stereotypes that are pervasive in US culture. It is a fact that the scientific and technological contributions of women and minorities have been barely, if at all, historically acknowledged or recognized. And, it remains a fact, that the previous facts continue to have negative impacts on students, teachers, faculty, and working professionals.

These facts are relevant to the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) communities we represent because they frame the availability of STEM labor and the context and assumptions that underlie scientific inquiry and technological advancement. This has been highlighted, for example, by the prior practice of excluding women from clinical trials, the differential success of peer reviewed papers when the names of the authors are those associated with women or minorities, as well as in a recent report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology of the racial/ethnic biases within facial recognition systems, and reports of biases in algorithmic systems to determine whether defendants should be granted bail.

STEM research, education, and practice are human activities and reflect the social contexts in which they are performed. If STEM students and professionals are ignorant of these facts, they cannot be sufficiently mindful of those contexts in order to mitigate the errors which may result.

With particular regard to the EO's impact on federal grantees, including professional societies, it appears that the effect of this EO would be, among other things, the following:

- Minimize our ability to develop programs to explain and mitigate the impact of stereotype threat on students, teachers, faculty, and engineering professionals,
- Endanger evidence-based systemic change strategies that promote equity in learning and working environments, and
- Inhibit efforts to catalyze the STEM enterprise to work collaboratively for inclusive change, resulting in a STEM workforce that reflects the population of the Nation.

Such constraints are antithetical to the progress we seek to make as a STEM community and would stall or even reverse the hard-fought progress that has been made.

We, the undersignedⁱ, condemn in the strongest possible terms and oppose this Executive Order.

Norman L. Fortenberry, Executive Director
American Society for Engineering Education

Beth Cunningham, Executive Officer
American Association of Physics Teachers

Steven R. Smith, Executive Director
American Political Science Association

Crispin Taylor, Chief Executive Officer
American Society of Plant Biologists

Nancy Kidd, Executive Director
American Sociological Association

Sandy Robert, Chief Executive Officer
Association for Women in Science

Charity Quick, Executive Director
Biomedical Engineering Society

Wendy Naus, Executive Director
Consortium of Social Science Associations

Rachel Puffer, Executive Director
Society for Personality and Social Psychology

Karen Hortung, Executive Director and CEO
Society of Women Engineers

ⁱ Organizational titles and affiliations are for identification purposes.